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Pravada in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and Propositions.

RAMA JANMABHUMI TO DHAMMADIPA

As indicated by our feature in this issue on the insanity at Ayodhya, India's rational voices are not mute: at least a few historians have spoken up. As W. H. Auden said, the fight against the false and the unfair is always worth it. *Pravada* salutes these courageous men and women of learning who have stood up to challenge one of the most dangerous trends in contemporary South Asian politics: majoritarian fundamentalism and its attempt to monopolize history.

What the Hindu extremist *sadhus* (what a misnomer!) and their 'volunteer' mob did, at the behest of the RSS, VHP and the BJP, at Ayodhya on December 6, was not merely demolish a 400-year old Muslim place of worship; they also enacted a particular contestation of 'history'—a history presented as the Hindu extremist-nationalist gospel. For them, it was a holy act to restore to the Hindus the *Janmabhumi* (the birthplace) of Rama. To parody Marx, when a myth is repeatedly deployed to sow ethnic bigotry and hatred, it sometimes becomes a material force capable of driving entire communities into the most frenzied and hysterical acts of vandalism and destruction.

The implications of Ayodhya for Sri Lanka are many. They are based on a fundamental parallel that runs through the two countries: the danger of majoritarian ethnic nationalism.

Sinhalese nationalist ideologues reacted to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in their own inimitably biased way. They warned Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka of possible Hindu terror. 'What Hindus are doing in India they may do in Sri Lanka too' is the preposterous lesson they have drawn from the Indian experience. The nationalist mind's simplistic view doesn't seem to perceive the logic of politics. It refuses to understand that it is majority nationalism against minorities that has been in action in Ayodhya, in Bombay, in Delhi and elsewhere.

As we noted in the last issue of *Pravada*, one redeeming feature of the otherwise violent ethnic politics of Sri Lanka is that there is still no political space for religion-based violence. Nevertheless, many actions and utterances of extremist Sinhalese intellectual groups have the potential to breed inter-religious hatred and religio-communal violence.

A major lesson to be learned from India is that recent anti-minority mob violence has been preceded by intense ethnic propaganda aimed at depriving minorities of an 'authentic history.' This was achieved by means of 'communalising' history. While political leaders of the BJP communalized politics, Hindu right-wing intellectuals played the vanguard ideological role in projecting a Hindu ethnocentric India—supposedly to recreate the 'golden' Hindu past. Even professional historians,

Pravāda

Vol 2 No 1
January 1993

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Pravada is published monthly by:

**Pravada Publications
129/6A Nawala Road
Colombo 5
Sri Lanka**

Telephone: 01-501339

Annual subscriptions:

Sri Lanka	Rs. 180
By Air mail:	
South Asia/Middle East	U.S. \$ 26
S. E. Asia/Far East	U.S. \$ 27
Europe /Africa	U.S. \$ 28
Americas/Pacific countries	U.S. \$ 38

aligned with groups ranging from the RSS to the BJP, became leading ideological cadres for the project of re-writing Indian history in such a way that ethnic and religious minorities were portrayed as illegitimate and alien communities who were depriving the 'sons of the soil'—the Hindus— of their 'due' place in Indian society and polity. The demolition of the Babri-Masjid by Hindu mobs was an attempt aimed at both the erasure of Muslim history of India and the creation of a Hindu *Rashtra* (a Hindu State) out of the ruins of minority histories.

The erasure of the history of minorities is a major intellectual pre-occupation of militant majoritarian nationalism. In Sri Lanka, the *jathika chinthanaya* and *Bhumiputra* ideologues are the Sri Lankan counterparts of the *Hinduthva* intellectuals of India. Some leading

figures of this narrowly ethnic intellectual stream are university professors, including professors of history. The denial of an indigenous history to Tamils has been a recurrent motive in their polemics.

In this Sinhala communalist appropriation of Sri Lankan history, a number of new 'theories' have been developed. The foremost among them is the thesis that the 'Tamil nation' in Sri Lanka is a creation of British imperialism of the 1830s. At one level, this is a response to Tamil nationalist claim to a 'Tamil homeland'; at another, it counterpoises the short history of the Tamil 'nation' with the 'long, continuous and unbroken history' of the Sinhalese which is posited to run as far back as the mythical age of Ravana.

Re-working the myth of Sinhalese racial origin by the *jathika chinthanayites* and other ideologues in the past few years is a part of the exercise of re-writing history. Students of current ideological debates in Sinhalese society may not have missed the recent revival of theories of the pre-Aryan origins of the Sinhalese. In mainstream Sinhalese nationalist historiography, the Aryan myth has played a central role in positing the racial superiority of the Sinhalese vis-a-vis all other ethnic communities. Now, the Ravana myth serves the purpose of countering the Tamil nationalist notion of a 'traditional homeland' in Sri Lanka—yet another exercise in ethnicized history—by creating a race history which could be traced back to greater antiquity. Thus, the Sinhalese are the only true sons of the soil!

This ancient-ness of the Sinhalese race, then, is juxtaposed with the lack of authenticity of the Tamils. One argument used constantly to deny Tamils their history as a coherent ethnic group is that they have, until recently, been a migrant community without a cohesive culture or a permanent place of habitation. It is also argued that Tamils in their long migrant-settler existence had no enduring attachment to this island.

All these arguments, analyses and theses have the cumulative effect of creating in Sinhalese society a distinctly negative perception— an image of a demonic other— of the entire Tamil community. Their legitimate home on this island as a community is thus questioned and repudiated. This image of minorities as 'undesirable aliens' can easily be transmitted to the minds of the majority community particularly against the backdrop of heightened ethnic tension generated by the separatist war. The LTTE's atrocities do, in no uncertain terms, re-inforce such 'intellectual' analyses which repeatedly find generous space in the Sinhalese press.

No one should be complacent about this scholarship of demonising minorities, on the assumption that it is an inevitable part of the ethnic animosities roused in the Sinhalese people in the course of the separatist war launched by Tamil Tigers. Even assuming—not entirely correctly—that ordinary men and women are usually susceptible to ethnic stereotypes and hostilities, we should not underestimate the inflammatory role being played by the Sinhala and Tamil nationalist intelligentsia, to create and disseminate mythology as history, prejudice as analysis, fiction as fact and fantasy as solution.

This is where the relevance of secularism to our political debate becomes more important. The attack on the Babri Masjid is a frontal assault on the secular bases of the Indian polity. Secular politics in the present historical context has two levels of meaning: non-religious and non-communal. Ethno-nationalist politics pre-supposes that the state should be based on religious or communal identities. It does not accommodate differences; it pledges, menacingly, their erasure. Ayodhya's lesson is too evident to be disregarded: ethnic scholarship legitimizes ethnic mob violence in politics, and the latter promises barbarism, not civilisation.

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